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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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SPOT COMMENTARY: Special Follow-Up Analysis on Gorbachev's Press Conference

In his lengthy prepared remarks following the joint appearance with the President, General Secretary Gorbachev focused principally on security and arms control issues, which he characterized as the "central thread" of the meeting. While giving a positive evaluation of the summit--stating in response to questions that he was "very optimistic" and that the world was now "more secure"--he noted that the discussions had been "frank and sharp"--at times, "extraordinarily sharp." He gave no indications that the USSR had altered its positions on arms control issues, and stressed the differences in the US and Soviet views on the origins of regional conflicts. Gorbachev spoke forcefully on the SDI issue, claiming he failed to understand how the President could endorse the concept. He said it would have been better if the meeting had resulted in solutions to the arms race, claimed the United States was not yet prepared to make the "big" decisions on this issue, and implored the Administration to carefully consider what it had heard from the Soviet side. He said the main significance of the meeting was "first and foremost" that it set the stage for the start of new efforts to normalize US-Soviet relations. Among his major themes were the following:

US and Soviet Strategic Thinking. Gorbachev said the sides shared the premise that a nuclear war cannot be won and must never be fought. In arguing for strategic parity, he stated that for the United States to have "less security" in comparison to the Soviet Union would be "disadvantageous" for both countries, because it would generate instability. He thought the United States ought to feel the same way about the USSR.

SDI. Showing no flexibility on SDI, Gorbachev said that if the arms race were extended into space the arms race would become uncontrollable. In response to questions, he said he had stressed to the President that the Soviets view space weapons as having offensive capability against satellite and ground targets. He noted that there was "some agreement" on

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the US side to look into the matter further. He also said Soviet scientists had assured him that if the USSR were forced to respond to SDI, it could do so in a way that was less costly, quicker, and more effective than US efforts, but he did not indicate what form the response would take. He said US deployment of SDI would "complicate the atmosphere" for the Geneva arms talks, a milder formulation than he has used in the past to imply a possible Soviet walkout.

Nuclear Arms Reductions. Gorbachev said the USSR would be prepared to radically reduce nuclear arms provided that the door to an arms race in outer space was "firmly closed." He noted that the sides agreed on the concept of 50 percent reductions but that their views on the systems to be reduced differed. He said, however, that these differences should not be "overdramatized" and that mutually acceptable solutions would be found if there were no arms race in space. Responding to a question, he said that what the US had done in Geneva "would go a long way" toward helping to find a compromise if a space arms race could be avoided.

Verification. Gorbachev claimed that the USSR would be willing to open its laboratories to inspection, but only after it has been agreed to halt SDI. He also said if the United States would agree to halt nuclear testing, verification would not be a problem.

Nuclear Testing. Injecting a note of urgency into his voice, Gorbachev expressed hope that the US Administration had not said its last word on this issue. He said that agreement on a joint test ban would be a "tremendous" step forward and would promote the negotiating process in Geneva.

US-Soviet Relations. Gorbachev expressed optimism about the prospect for improved relations but argued that the countries must work together. He characterized the meeting as the first step in the process of efforts to improve relations, citing in particular the agreement to hold future consultations and his remarks to the President on the political gains that would result from an expansion of economic ties.

Regional Issues. Gorbachev's remarks on regional issues were some of the sharpest and suggest that he was irritated by how they were handled during the meetings. His prepared remarks and answers to questions made it clear that he considers arms

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control to be the top priority and amounted to a rejection of the US regional issues initiative. Gorbachev acknowledged that the US and USSR "in principle" could work together to reduce regional tensions but rejected any suggestion that the USSR was somehow responsible for such tensions. Pointing to the LDC debt problem--and specifically Mexico--Gorbachev argued that regional problems are rooted in indigenous socio-economic conditions and not the result of East-West rivalry. Arguments to the contrary, according to Gorbachev, are "irresponsible" and "inadmissible banalities." His singling out of Mexico may have been meant as a riposte to US treatment of Afghanistan in the discussions. In his opening remarks, Gorbachev insisted that any US or Soviet actions in the Third World must respect the "sovereign right" of each nation to choose its political and economic system, methods and friends.

Comment. In keeping with past public performances, Gorbachev assumed a self-confident air while avoiding bombast or polemics. He was most animated when critiquing the US position on SDI, but otherwise sought to characterize Soviet concerns as reasonable responses to positions taken by the US during the talks. On SDI, for instance, he defended Moscow's rejection of its defensive purpose by citing an alleged remark by former President Johnson that "whoever gains power in space will rule the earth."

Gorbachev appeared acutely conscious of the image he was projecting to the Western press. In the question and answer session, he spoke at a measured and deliberate pace and when taking questions addressed some US correspondents by name. He appeared to adopt a deliberately indulgent pose toward the press corps, repeating answers to similar questions rather than brusquely dismissing them as he did during his press conference in Paris in October.

While portraying the meeting as a success, Gorbachev displayed clear but tempered disappointment on the lack of progress on arms control. He appeared most interested in portraying the meeting as offering the potential for progress in the future on arms control and bilateral and regional issues, providing that the United States does its part. He also set the stage for placing the onus on the United States, in particular the President's personal commitment to SDI, for any lack of future progress on arms control. (S NF)

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